

THE NIGHT THEY TOOK UP THE RAILROAD TRACKS

By: Moses Rountree



CENTER STREET AT WALNUT STREET LOOKING NORTH [1915]

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But so was the Boston Tea Party.

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Named in the suit were City Manager Grantham and members of the Board of Aldermen: M. E. Robinson, J. A. McClenny, Sam Bridgers, A. T. Griffin, F. B. Daniels, W. P. Rose, W. A. Carter, U. M. Gillikin and John R. Raper.

The suit alleged that the action taken was in violation of a resolution adopted by commissioners of the town of Goldsboro on February 3, 1854, granting North Carolina Railroad a right of way on Center Street, with permission to lay tracks, and the contract right to "maintain, keep, operate, lease, dispose of, and otherwise to act with reference to said tracks as property under protection of the constitution and laws of North Carolina and the Constitution of the United States."

It was alleged that a resolution passed by aldermen instructing Grantham to remove the tracks was in violation of the North Carolina Constitution and of the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution, "both of which declare that no one shall be deprived of his property except by due process of law."

The action of Grantham was declared to have been "in total and utter disregard of the property and contract rights of plaintiffs."

It was asserted that the plaintiffs had reason to believe they could take no steps to "remedy the wrong inflicted upon them without causing breach of peace and open conflict with the forces of the defendant city of Goldsboro."

The suit asked that the court require defendants to restore and rebuild plaintiffs' tracks on Center Street between Ash and Spruce; that the defendants

and their agents be permanently restrained from again interfering with plaintiffs' property or molesting them in their "lawful operation, conduct and maintenance of said track and right of way;" and that the plaintiffs recover costs in the action.

The complaint stated that North Carolina Railroad, on August 16, 1898, had leased to Southern, for a term of 99 years, a Center Street track and right of way, and that by terms of the lease "did covenant with lessee that during the entire term it should have and enjoy quiet, peaceable and uninterrupted possession of the property rights, privileges and franchises pertaining thereto."

Southern was obligated, the complaint said, to return the track and right of way to North Carolina Railroad at expiration of lease "in like good condition and repair as when leased." Southern would have been able and willing to comply with its obligation "but for the notorious, unlawful and unconstitutional acts of the defendants."

The attitude of Goldsboro officials was a far cry from the cannon salute and big celebration that had greeted the first train of the Wilmington and Weldon (later ACL) Railroad as it arrived on February 23, 1838.

From Waynesborough on the Neuse, and rural areas, came farmers to marvel at the newfangled steam locomotive, out to revolutionize transporation and make farming an industry in its own right.

At the suggestion of Major Matthew T. Goldsborough, surveyor for the railroad, Arnold Borden built a hotel near the intersection of Center and Walnut streets. The village was made a stopover point for trains and for changing engines. The next year (1839) citizens adopted the name of Goldsborough (first spelling) for the community.

By 1845, citizens along the Neuse had been moving to Goldsboro in large numbers. An election on removing the county seat from Waynesborough to Goldsboro failed that year, but carried in 1847, when the town was incorporated.

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Because of the train station and hotel facilities, the intersection of Center and Walnut became the hub of community activities.

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This picture, taken when railroad travel was flourishing, shows the ACL coal shute at the south end of Center Street. Trains stopped there to take on coal and water for the engine. This south-bound passenger train was en route to Wilmington. Building on left was the furniture factory. Marcus Jones, who lived at 206 E. Elm St., says he used to play on the coal shute when he was a boy.

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UNION STATION — BUILT IN 1909

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They were ordered by the Commission to start construction at once.

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THE MORNING AFTER REMOVING THE RAILS.
CROSSTIES STILL LITTER THE STREET.

The matter was taken to the State Supreme Court, which in August upheld the site selection.

Construction got underway and the union station was completed in 1909. A big crowd was on hand to see the first train, ACL's northbound 48, enter the station.

The same year alderman adopted ordinances regulating freight traffic on Center Street. The speed of freight trains was reduced from eight to four miles per hour; no car could stand longer than five minutes at any point (eliminating unloading operations); and shifting in the heart of town was limited to two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon.

With shifting operations in time confined to north and south ends of Center Street, negotiations were started to acquire ACL's right of way through four blocks, which would give the city an argument for ousting Southern, whose lessor, North Carolina Railroad, had merely given permission for it to lay tracks on the ACL right of way.

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Southern refused, it being the only mile of right of way it owned in North Carolina.

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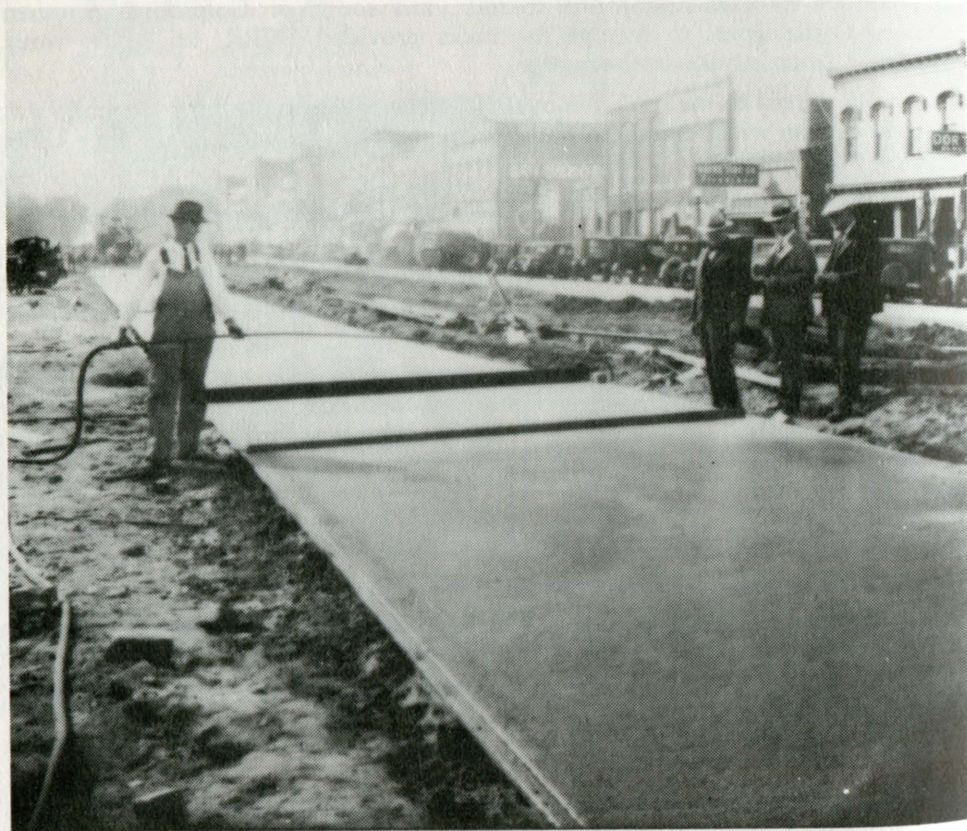
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PAVING CENTER STREET AFTER RAILROAD TRACKS REMOVED

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*Brownson, this is my
Dad's brother—
He died a few
wks ago—
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ilroad Tracks



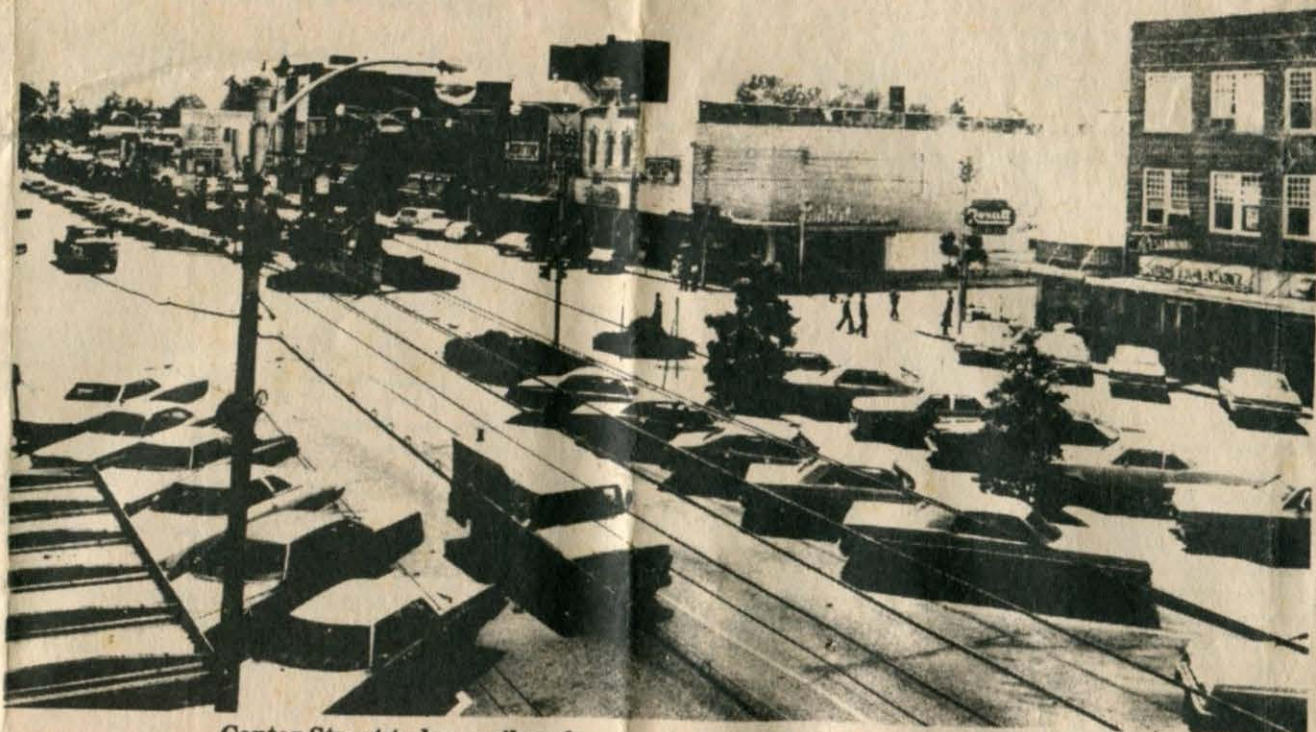
Meters Charles Epps and wife, Bertie Cynthia Parrish

HE HELPED — M. C. Epps, shown here with his wife, is the only known surviving member of the crew of citizens that worked from midnight to morning to remove the tracks from Goldsboro's Center St. The removal was illegal, but Epps says it was justifiable. (Staff Photo)

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When the railroad tracks ran down Center St. . .



Center Street today, railroads gone, trees and hanging baskets added.

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Editor's Note

"This Argus o'er the people's rights doth an eternal vigil keep. No soothing strains o' Maid's son can lull its hundred eyes to sleep..."

Well, maybe just once.

The Daily Argus in April of 1926 closed all its "hundred eyes" while townspeople ripped up the railroad tracks and cross-ties that ran down the middle of Center St.

While railroad officials fumed and brought court action, the town simply pretended nothing had happened. And even the Daily Argus looked the other way.

But it was too good a story not to print. Moses Rountree has done the research and interviewed some of the people who were in on that midnight caper.

Here, a bit late, is full coverage of the story that changed the face of downtown Goldsboro forever.

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